Giants among us

One of the benefits or drawbacks of being a D.C. suit is that on occasions you're invited to make speeches at award ceremonies. In November of last year I was invited to Chicago by the Du Page, IL Flight Standards District Office (FSDO) to give the closing remarks at a presentation honoring 18 Master Mechanic award winners.

This was the first "Master Mechanic" presentation that I was invited to attend. I knew this would not be an ordinary retirement ceremony or recognition award. This presentation was very special. Just to be nominated for the Master Mechanic Award you must have spent 50 years in aviation maintenance, be a U.S. citizen, and be recommended in writing by at least three A&P mechanics. While reading the recipients' biographies it became very apparent that these were the mechanics who wrote our aviation maintenance history. All are IA's and the majority are pilots. The average ages of these master mechanics is 73 to 93. Most are World War II veterans, but perhaps the most interesting fact is that most of the 18 master mechanics are still working at least part time in aviation maintenance, including the senior Master Mechanic.

Intuitively, I knew as I finished reading the last biography that I was not the right guy to say what should be said. Only a "Master Mechanic" could say the right words at the right time. I felt—-small.

The Award Presentation

The Du Page FSDO knows how to put on a first class Master Mechanic award ceremony. It was held at Lewis University's new aviation building on the evening of Saturday, November 20th. The auditorium was laid out in a half circle that seated over 350 folks and almost every seat was taken by family and friends of the award winners. Being a D.C. suit, I got to sit up front facing the audience, which was fine for me but visually hard on the people in the first five rows.

The award ceremony started right on time with all the proper ruffles and flourishes. After brief introductions, the audience was introduced, via an old newsreel clip, to Mr. Charles Taylor, the Wright Brothers mechanic, and the individual who the Master Mechanic award is named after. After the film we were also given some personal insights into the first aviation mechanic from Mr. Taylor's grandson and great grandson.

About an hour into the program it was time for the awards. The master of ceremonies spent about two minutes filling in the details of what would happen next. In a clear voice he began: "As each Master Mechanic's name is called in alphabetical order, please come forward, and a list of his aviation accomplishments will be read by a narrator. It was previously agreed upon," he continued, "that due to time restrictions, the reading of each of the Master Mechanic's accomplishments will be limited to just 5 minutes."

Up until the master of ceremonies opening address, I was content to sit stiffly, cross legged in my chair, with my hands on my knees. I remembered that I was vaguely concerned about the possibility that the sock on my cross leg would roll down by itself, thereby forcing me to commit a breach of political incorrectness by treating the audience to a view of an inch of my pasty white calf skin.

But the part about "Limited to five minutes" really awakened my attention and I forgot about my errant sock. If I died today, I thought, even a priest born in Ireland would be hard pressed to fill a 1-minute eulogy with my aviation maintenance accomplishments.

Even that stray thought died as I focused in on the first name that was called and the long list accomplishments for a narrator to read within an impossibly short 5-minute time limit.

One by one, these men stood up and moved to the front of the auditorium. As the fifth Master Mechanic approached the lectern to receive his award, I began to notice that something magical was happening, and that this magic was common to all the award winners.

As each recipient's name was called, they stood up slowly, getting the blood running again. Then, they looked at their family and friends for a second and then slowly started to walk towards the front of the room.
They grew taller, their backs became straighter, their strides stronger, their heads more erect. And once reaching the lectern, they stood at attention, chest out, with their thumbs resting on the outside seam of their trousers — just like they were taught to do when they were in boot camp so long ago. With the list of their accomplishments read aloud, and on receiving the award, each new Master Mechanic quietly acknowledged the audience's applause with a wave, thanked the narrator and turned and walked back to his seat — his eyes shining with pride. They were young men again, filled with promise and purpose. Master Mechanics who just received the highest award in the aviation maintenance profession.

Closing remarks
When the last Master Mechanic sat down the master of ceremonies called my name. It was time for the closing remarks. I discreetly pulled up my errant sock, stood up slowly to get the blood running again and walked slowly to the lectern. I grasped the lectern firmly, smiled to the audience with my "hope-my-sock-doesn't-fall-down smile" and at the same time concentrated on keeping my knees from knocking. Smiling once again, I began.

Good evening, fellow mechanics, technicians, ladies, gentlemen and honored guests. It is a great honor, and real personal privilege for me to be here with you tonight.
I have been asked to make this special evening's closing remarks. However, ladies and gentlemen, I must share with you that it is one of the most difficult assignments I have ever attempted. How does one find the appropriate words to recognize each of our aviation professionals for dedicating more than 50 years of service to the aviation maintenance profession?
Fifty years, fifty years in one profession! My profession, your profession. Fifty years each, spent working on airplanes.
How does one conceptualize 50 years, let alone recognize it with words? I first tried to address it in units of time. Let's see.
Fifty years — that is over 100,000 hours or six million minutes minimum of aviation "hands on experience." Next I tried making 50 years real — in human terms — by calculating that 50 years equaled 8,000,000 heartbeats, or maybe 50 years could be measured in the amount of scar tissue on a mechanic's hands, face, and arms — the result of painful encounters with upturned safety wire or cotter pins. I even speculated that maybe 50 years could be measured by the number of empty 55-gallon containers of Go-Jo hand cleaner.
But the bottom line to understanding the significance of the "Charles Taylor Master Mechanic" award is this: These 18 individuals that are sitting here represent over 900 hundred years of "professional" aviation experience and have earned the title "Master Mechanic" in the eyes of their peers and the FAA.
I would now like to address the award winners personally:
"Master Mechanics," no doubt some younger mechanics sitting in this room just see you as 18 people in their seventies or more. Old timers who started on their aviation career working on round engines and dope and fabric airplanes, maybe even WWII military aircraft, years before they were a twinkle in their father's eye.
If that's all the younger mechanics see in you gentlemen, then they are blind. Please forgive them. Forgive the short sightedness and arrogance of youth. They fail to remember that you held our hand, prepared the way, and brought us into the jet age — and in the long process you made our industry safer and our profession better. These youngsters just lack the experience and maturity. With time and experience they will learn to recognize Giants when they see them.

Yes — Giants, ladies and gentlemen — Giants! These professionals, these mechanics are giants. These 18 individuals have for the last 50 years have left their mark all over our aviation profession. What do Giants do? They hold up the values of our profession, teach new mechanics the importance of trust and integrity, and share with others the skills that others have taught them. They are our professions heart, soul, and corporative memory. They make a difference.

Are these just nice words for a nice occasion? No, there are really such things as Giants. They are real — for I met one when I was a young and arrogant mechanic, and when you meet a Giant, ladies and gentlemen, you are never quite the same afterwards. May I spend just three minutes and share with you my experience?

Time: Spring 1971, Place: North Philadelphia Airport — Inside an old gray T-hangar stands a Twin Comanche all opened up for an annual inspection. I was twenty eight years old with an A&P ticket that was just a little over a year old. I was doing a free-lance inspection to earn some money to pay off a private loan against my 1969 VW. I asked George Garabedian, IA, to do the annual. George, who had his A&P ticket for over 25 years, was working for Aero Services, an Aerial survey company located right on the field. George arrived on time and I watched him carefully begin the inspection. He carefully checked the ADs and the paperwork. Then with flashlight and mirror in hand he inspected the aircraft. He looked in places I would never look and all the time he told me why he was doing it.

Finally he was at the tail and he asked me if I checked the cable pulleys in back of the fuselage because “it was a tight fit back by the tail.” I told him that I shined a flashlight at them from the cabin rear bulkhead access panel opening, and they looked OK. George’s eyes kind of squinted up as he looked me straight in the eye and he asked me again — “Did you check those pulleys and cables, Obie?”

Now let me tell you folks, despite being younger and taller than George, I knew better than to lie to a Giant. “No George I did not” was my shameful reply. George’s eyes never left mine and without changing his tone of voice, he simply said: “Obie, we don’t do that in aviation” — and with saying that — he climbed back into the tail, turned on his flashlight and checked the pulleys himself.

With just seven words “OBIE, We don’t do that in Aviation,” George “The Giant” Garabedian taught a pimple-faced Irish kid, in just three seconds, everything about maintenance profession values that three year’s experience working on army helicopters and 22 months in A&P school and a year in industry did not.

I’m sure that other mechanics sitting here and technicians working at other airports worldwide can share similar stories with us about the 18 Giants we are recognizing today. My only regret is that I did not meet these other Giants earlier in my aviation maintenance career, for I’m sure I would have been a better technician for the experience. But I’m glad that I still have the opportunity to seek their advice, benefit from their experiences, and profit from their wisdom. Hopefully I’ll be a better aviation FAA inspector for the experience.

Up until now I have shared my own ideas and experiences about what 50 years in a profession means to me and what giants are.

If I may be so bold, and with great respect, I would like to offer our Giants a personal observation or two for their careful consideration and evaluation.

Gentlemen, the awards that you received tonight do not signify or in any way mark the last milestone of your aviation maintenance career.

These awards you received tonight are not presented to you as an aviation good-bye gift or final salute. We members of the aviation maintenance profession are not as short-sighted as other professions who send their most experienced people out to pasture with a slap on the back, a free dinner and a cheap watch. We would never do that. Mechanics are called many things but we are never called fools!

The Charles Taylor Master Mechanic awards that you just received are a formal recognition of your knowledge, skill and high level of professionalism that you have demonstrated to this point in your aviation maintenance career.
The Aviation Maintenance profession still needs your experience, your wisdom, your common sense. We need you! I need you! Your job here with us is still not finished! You still have a lot to share with the rest of us! You must show us how to become more professional, you must teach us your values and you must teach us to be — Giants.
God Bless you all and thank you.

Coffee and cake followed and I had the great pleasure to spend some time with each of the master mechanics. When it was all over, and everyone was putting on coats, Rich Mileham, Airworthiness Inspector from the FSDO, asked me what the Du Page office could do to make the Master Mechanic presentation better. “Everything was just great!” was my honest reply. “But even though we were pushing the maximum capacity of the room, I would have liked to have seen more younger mechanics at the presentation. Just to talk to these giants was a rare experience, not to be missed,” I added. “How will we get more of the younger mechanics to attend these events?” Rich asked. “Industry and the FAA have got to tell them about Giants among us,” was my response.

Aircraft Maintenance Technology wishes to pay tribute to the individuals who have contributed so much to the aviation profession. We present a random selection of biographies of individuals who have received the Charles Taylor award. This is only a small sampling of the “Giants” of aviation maintenance. Over 200 recipients have been selected so far, so it’s impossible to include all of them. To those of you not mentioned in this tribute, we salute you.

Robert L. McEvoy began his career in 1939 in Buffalo, NY, where he enrolled in the Burgard Vocational High School’s Aircraft Maintenance Technology curriculum.
After graduation in 1942, he secured a position with the Curtiss Wright Aircraft Company as a line mechanic working on the P-47 Thunderbolt. He soon enlisted in the Army Air Corps where he maintained WWII’s long-range B-17 bomber.
When McEvoy returned to the private sector he worked with American Airlines, again in Buffalo. He began working with vintage piston-engined McDonnell-Douglas aircraft, but eventually became Chief Foreman on Boeing 707s, 727s, 747s, and DC-10s.
McEvoy retired from American Airlines in 1983 and began work at Prior Aviation Service Inc. at the Greater Buffalo International Airport. He earned his aircraft and powerplant licenses alongside Jack B. Prior at Burgard and now works for him in the field of General Aviation Aircraft Maintenance.

John F. Dacy’s interest in aviation began when he obtained his first aircraft, an OX-5 powered Pheasant, in 1934. He worked on and stored the aircraft on the family farm which eventually became Dacy Airport.
During WWII he was in the Army Air Corps and served as a B-24 Crew Chief in Italy and later worked with B-29s in Tucson. Returned from the war, he started Dacy Airport as a commercial airport. He attended Moody Bible Institute to obtain his A&E and later obtained his Inspection Authorization. He has a Commercial Pilot Certificate.
His specialty for the past twenty years has been antique aircraft with special attention given to Stearmans and Continental W670 radial engines. He offers custom overhauls in addition to 100-hour and annual inspections on general aviation aircraft.
Dacy is a former recipient of the FAA Mechanic of the Year Award.

Marcellus F. Foose attended the Aeronautical University in Chicago after high school. While there he illustrated a book, Flight Instructor, written by Captain Duncan, R.A.F. Squadron Commander in WWI.
From 1936 to 1939 he worked for Air Associates Inc., a major supply house. After that he entered into a partnership with Don Braun to own and operate B&F Aircraft Service & Accessories at Harlem Airport in Oak Lawn, IL. In 1949, Braun sold out and Foose acquired a new partner, Glen Courtwright. The operation serviced, repaired, rebuilt as many as 32 AT-6s and many Pratt & Whitney 1340 motors. They added a mail order supply to the business in the early 1950s.
He recently sold the partnership and is now involved in aircraft mechanics as a hobby. He designed and is building a convertible mono, biplane. Foose is also still involved in servicing and flying his Cherokee and Aeronca Chief.

Richard V. Hawker started working at the airport in Kankakee, IL, in 1927. In 1937 he learned to fly from Delbert Koerner and obtained his private and commercial licenses.
He moved his family to Martin, TN, where he ran an airport and had a contract with the Tennessee Junior College to teach aviation classes. It was also in Tennessee that he received his acrobatic rating in a Waco UPF7.
During WWII he was made a Warrant Officer and afterward he began working with American Airlines. Soon after that he started working on his A&P.
Hawker retired from American 21 years ago. He has spent his time since then working at a hangar on his farm or at one of several surrounding airports.

Stanley Tonkin had his first airplane ride in 1929 in an 0X-5 powered Curtiss Robin at the Elmhurst (IL) Airport. His first dual was at the same airport in 1936. That same year he went to Los Angeles to work at the National Air Races at Mines Field.
He started working as an apprentice aircraft mechanic at Curtiss Reynolds Airport in 1938, and moved on to Darr Aero Tech in 1940 as crew chief. While there he became licensed. Tonkin enlisted in the Air Force in 1942 and was assigned to Smyrna Air Base in Nashville, TN, as Base Inspector of Maintenance. He later went to Hendrich Field in Florida, where he taught ground school.
Returning to civilian life in 1945 he worked for Parks Aircraft at Palwaukee, IL, Airport. In 1946 Tonkin was in charge of maintenance at Mitchell Field in Lombard. He now lives at Naper Aero Estates, a private air strip, and owns his own plane.

Clarence W. Witte earned his A & P certificate in 1941 and went to work as a maintenance technician at Davenport Cram Field and at Machesney Airport in Rockford, IL. After two years in the U.S. Navy he worked at Kewanee and Geneseo Airports. He got his commercial license in 1950. Then in the summer of 1952 Witte got involved in aerial crop spraying in North Carolina where he fabricated his own spray system.
In 1956 he worked full and part time jobs for different FBOs as maintenance technician and foreman. Witte also has his own shop at Kewanee Airport. He opened Air-Energy Service, Inc., an engine overhaul shop, in 1986. He developed 12-gallon aluminum wing tanks and several engine mounts including a hinged swing out type mount to facilitate servicing engine accessories when installing the starter and alternator.
His current project is the restoration of a 1946 Piper PA-12 Super Cruiser. He also still flies his 1969 Cessna Skylane.

Gordon A. Kappe enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps Technical School in 1941. After graduation he was assigned as Crew Chief to a Combat Crew on a B-25 going to Brisbane, Australia and later

to New Guinea. He completed the Army Air Force Training Command Pilot Training Course in 1944 and went on to receive B-17 training.
Relieved from active duty, Kappe entered training at General Airmotive Corporations for airplane and engine mechanic school and received his mechanic certificate in 1947. He managed a maintenance shop for Sutherland Bros. Flying Service in Gladwin, MI, for two years and then did the same for Hansen's Flying Service in Lakeview, MI.
Kappe received his Inspection Authorization in 1960. After a period of time in Japan working for Slick Airways he became Director of Maintenance for Waukegan Aero LTD in 1985, where he is presently working as an advisor to the maintenance department and assisting the Director of Maintenance.

Cornelius R. Coffey entered the Automotive Engineering School in Chicago in 1923. He decided to convert his mechanical training from auto to aircraft engines and enrolled in Curtiss Wright Flying Service where he completed a Master Mechanic Course for his A&E. In 1931, he became the first black man in America to hold an A&E certificate. The same year, he helped establish an airport at Robbins, IL, then moved to Harlem Airport in Oak Lawn, IL. He founded the Coffey School of Aeronautics there in 1938 with four J-3 Cubs.
He made his first solo flight in 1928 and later received his instrument rating at the Lewis School of Aeronautics at Lockport where he served as an instructor for six years.
For 14 years Coffey taught aircraft engine mechanics at Dunbar High School. He focused on early flight training for teenagers with a serious interest in aviation.
Robert W. Bushby began flying lessons in 1943 and went on to receive ratings of Commercial pilot, MEL, and Flight Instructor. He entered military service in September 1944 and spent most of his time in aircraft and engine maintenance schooling and work as an aircraft mechanic.
Bushby obtained his FAA aircraft mechanic certificate in 1947 and worked as a freelance aircraft mechanic in Joliet, IL. He attended a Lewis College Aviation Maintenance course and got his FAA Engine Mechanic certificate. After graduation he worked as A&E mechanic in Ottawa, IL, and San Antonio, TX.
From 1954 to 1970 he worked for Sinclair Research Laboratories as a technician in its engine test facility. During the same period he did part time work as aircraft mechanic and also producer of Midget Mustang and Mustang-II kits for airplane homebuilder. He also obtained his Inspection Authorization in 1957. From 1970 to present he has worked full time producing the aircraft kits and performing maintenance.

Robert F. Luman, Sr. began working as a mechanic at the Joliet Airport when he learned to fly in 1932. He went on to work at Lewis Lockport Airport in 1943. It was here that he obtained his Airframe and Engine license in September 1943. A few years later he received his Inspector Authorization.
Luman, celebrating the 50th anniversary of his A&E this year, is still active everyday at Lumanair Aviation Services in Aurora, IL. He devotes most of his time there to parts management and work order processing.

Virgil A. Gacke began his aviation career in 1943 flying Stearmans at Thunderbird Field in Phoenix, AZ, as a cadet entering WWII. He later became a turret specialist working on B-17s.
As a civilian in 1945 he started working at the Spencer, IA, Airport as an apprentice mechanic and saved enough to buy his first airplane — a 1946 Stearman — which he completely rebuilt. In 1947 Gacke attended the Spartan Aeronautical College in Tulsa, OK, and earned his A&P while he worked nights renovating DC-3s.

After Spartan, he moved to the Chicago area where he was hired as an A&P at a local airport after turning down a job with United Airlines. During his time there he was appointed to Designated Mechanic Inspector. In 1957 he bought the maintenance shop on the field and started Curley's Aero Repair. He moved the business to Howell Airport in Crestwood, IL, in 1960. He works on a wide variety of general aviation aircraft and is an expert on Navions.

Delbert Koerner was fascinated by mechanical things from an early age. So, in 1926 he went to Peoria, IL, to learn to fly in a Curtiss OX-5 powered Standard biplane. He soon soloed, purchased the plane, then flew it back home and taught his brother to fly. The two decided to start an airport in 1927. They moved to Kankakee, traded the Standard for a Waco 10, and began what is now Koerner Aviation Inc.

In 1930 Koerner was issued a certificate by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, National Aeronautic Association of U.S.A. Inc. and signed by Orville Wright. When WWII broke out he went to work for a year for Ford at Willow Run as a production test pilot on the B-24 Liberator. He then went to work for Curtiss in Buffalo, NY.

After the war, he returned to Kankakee. Koerner is a commercial pilot, instructor, designated examiner, an FAA Safety Counselor, and A&P, and has his Inspector Authorization certificate.